

The impact of COVID–19 pandemic on the *Almajiris* in Northern Nigeria and the need for social work intervention

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Abstract

The *Almajiri* system, an unregulated Islamic scholarship practice of sending children to Islamic scholars, has been a part of the culture of Northern Nigeria. These children live a communal lifestyle. In the ideal situation, the communities support them as they leave their families to become servants of Allah. Regrettably, these *Almajiri* children live in some of the shabbiest conditions imaginable and are forced into daily street begging. This lifestyle becomes a hotbed for the spread of COVID-19. The public health danger led to efforts by governors in northern Nigeria, to disperse these *Almajiri* children during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper provides an overview of the *Almajiri* system and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this traditional institution. It evaluates the response of the various governments in the region to addressing the challenge as well as the need for policy change at all levels that will lead to decisive action in the favour of these children. This change will involve social work intervention through the process of mobilizing traditional and faith leaders, social influencers, and other citizens as well as the children themselves to stand up for the rights of *Almajiri* children to a fair start in life.

Keywords: COVID-19, *Almajiris*, impact, social work, intervention

Introduction

The Hausa word *Almajiri* is derived from the Arabic word, "al-Muhajirun," which refers to a person who migrated from his home in search of Islamic knowledge. Colloquially, the term has expanded to refer to any young person who begs on the streets and does not attend secular school. The *Almajirai* usually begin their studies between the ages of 3 and 12 and learn about the Quran in schools called 'tsangayu' (Nwanze, 2019). They are usually from poor rural backgrounds. With the increasing level of poverty in the country, the care of the *Almajiri* became overwhelmingly burdensome for the Mallams (Islamic scholar) who were left with no choice but to send these little boys out to beg at certain times of the day and bring home money for food (Maigari, 2017).

A UNICEF report of 2014 put the number of *Almajiri* in Nigeria at 9.5 million, or 72 percent of the country's 13.2 million out-of-school children (UNICEF, 2014). The National Council for the Welfare of Destitute (NCWD, 2001) puts the population of

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the *Almajirai* at about 7 million and research shows that 6 out of 10 of them never find their way back home (Kwagyang & Mahmood, 2015). Many are lost through street violence, ritual murder, while others are lost through disease and hunger. The NCWD (2001) observed that the *Almajiri* system promotes poverty, neglect, abuses, and exploits young boys, who wear tattered clothing, beg for food on the streets, and work for free. In one study of *Almajirai* in Kaduna state, Dahiru (2017) noted that 38% of boys surveyed said they were tired all the time, and 62% reported feeling hungry. In the same study, 88% of *Almajirai* are said to spend most of their time begging. The conditions that *Almajiri* live in are often unhygienic and not conducive to their health (NCWD, 2001).

Over the centuries, the followers of the system have deviated from the original idea and in practice, some of the children sent to the *Almajiri* school for learning end up becoming social misfits. These vulnerable children lack parental care and are sometimes subjected to constant flogging during the lessons. These children are transformed into aggressive and violent young adults, who do not hesitate to transfer their anger to the larger society (Omeni, 2015). These boys swam into the society with no bearing, moving from street to street, house to house, and vehicle to vehicle. They seem to be everywhere, markets, car parks, restaurants, university gates, and so on. They have become a burden as well as a nuisance to society. They roam about dirty, tattered, bare feet, pale with flies pecking on their cracked lips and dry faces, which is filled with rashes or ringworm. They sleep on worn-out mats in uncompleted buildings. The small rooms where the *Almajiri* and 15 others sleep are not conducive, as there are no windows for cross-ventilation and the walls have given room to cracks looking as if it will fall the next minute (Abbo, Zain & Njidda, 2017; Gomment & Esomchi, 2017).

These victims of neglect are also victims of exploitation. Many give them stipend or leftovers out of sympathy or after exploiting them for menial jobs, others abhor them, hold them with contempt and even blame them for their helplessness. Many eventually became traders, drivers, and so on. Those who could not make it are condemned to menial jobs, since they have no skills. They resort to wheelbarrow pushing, touting, and so on. The nomadic search for livelihood and the struggle to support the Mallam take much of their time rather than engage in learning (NCWD, 2001).

The *Almajiri* system is often attacked for promoting youth delinquency and violence and for providing street gangs and Boko Haram with an ample supply of vulnerable young recruits. People believe that the *Almajiri* system fuels Boko Haram because the children are sometimes radically indoctrinated and manipulated by their Quranic teachers. The children are economically disadvantaged and live without their parents, which makes them easy targets for recruitment (Abbo, Zain & Njidda, 2017; Kwagyang & Mahmood, 2015).

COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the *Almajiris*

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. It is described as an infectious disease that is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus. The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. While the virus

infects people regardless of wealth and social status, the poor will be most affected. The *Almajiris* are exposed to health hazards and are potential carriers of the virus. The coming of the novel COVID-19 pandemic has brought the need to urgently address the problem of *Almajiri* as different states governments are treating them like lepers and refusing them entries.

With COVID 19, the concerns of many observers have tripled about the future of *Almajiri*, millions of whose livelihood is nurtured by begging from one street to the other in large numbers and who end the day sleeping in crowded tents in what has become a time-tested art (Akintunde, Chen, and Di 2020). Scholars are of the view that COVID-19 poses one of the greatest challenges to the *Almajiri* system. These children live permanently in poor and vulnerable conditions. The real danger of COVID-19 has potential implications for the *Almajiri* system in Northern Nigeria since the *Almajiri* are not an integral part of the social security system administered by the Federal and State Governments (Amanambu, 2020).

Akintunde, Chen, and Di (2020) noted that they are the poorest of the poor because of their social conditions, they are most vulnerable to the spread of diseases. Apart from their poor conditions, there is also a concern about their social and living conditions. Amanambu, (2020) reported that the *Almajiris* are not captured in the government palliatives and that abiding with social distancing is a problem when they permanently live in a crowd. He also noted that it is near impossible for them to abide with stay at home or lockdown order when their survival mandates them to trek for kilometers looking for food. Infection of one *Almajiri* is likely to endanger over 1,000 children and households in less than one hour because of their ways of life (Akintunde, Chen, & Di, 2020).

Some efforts made to ameliorate the sufferings of the *Almajiris*

The *Almajiri* has continued to catch the attention of local and international communities. In the Northern states, some United Nations agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have made efforts to intervene. The federal government's intervention was the *Almajiri* Education programme launched in 2012 by the President Goodluck Jonathan administration. About 165 *Almajiri* schools were built to integrate Islamic and Western education. Also, in Kano, the state government's introduction of the free feeding programme has helped while allowances are being paid to some Mallams (Islamic teacher). But these efforts have not removed the social and material conditions that gave rise to the practice in the first place (Nwachukwu, 2020).

The Northern Governors' Forum finally decided to tackle the problem headlong. The once-useful *Almajirai* are now purveyors of death as the spread of COVID-19 is said to be high among the children. The *Almajiri* problem that has been refused to be addressed and tackled by Northern leaders has now turned out to be a huge public health concern. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought the entire world to its knee, is one of the factors compelling leaders in Northern Nigeria, especially the governors, to come to terms with the social and security menace posed by the army of out-of-school children (*Almajirai*). They have therefore taken bold steps to return them to their various home states within the region (Olumide, 2020).

The reason adduced by the governors was that their action was to safeguard public health and stem the spread of the pandemic. As the Northern governors make arrangements to send these children back to their homes, southern leaders have raised the alarm that many of the affected children are being transported (smuggled) into the south since the northern governors began the process (Olumide, 2020). There are many unconfirmed reports that the *Almajiris* are being taken to the South-Eastern, South-Western region of Nigeria in truckloads. The influx of the *Almajiris* into the South-Eastern, South-Western part of Nigeria is met with a frown by the inhabitants of this region. It is believed that the *Almajiris* have no homes to go to in the South and so will constitute an enormous nuisance to the host environment since they have no economic, social or political advantage to the host communities (Oba & Opeyemi, 2020)

Recently, the governor of Kaduna State, Nasir El-Rufai, announced that the Northern States Governors' Forum was determined to end the problem and he has taken the lead too. According to him "COVID-19 pandemic provided the opportunity to determine the state of *Almajiri* education" (Nwachukwu, 2020). Governor El-Rufai is also matching words with action as he has warned that parents who enroll their children into the *Almajiri* education system stand the risk of prosecution and up to two years in jail. El-Rufai who said this when he visited some 200 *Almajiri* children repatriated from Nasarawa state and undergoing rehabilitation and optical screening at Government College, Kurmin Mashi, Kaduna, also said every child in Kaduna State must get 12-year free and compulsory primary and secondary school education (Nwachukwu, 2020). This indeed is a step in the right direction.

The governor also said any Islamic cleric who enrolls any child into the *Almajiri* system would also be prosecuted and jailed as well as fined ₦100,000 or ₦200,000 per child (The Guardian, 2020). He said all the *Almajiri* pupils repatriated from other states of the country were indigenes of the state adding that the government would give them all the opportunity they deserved to grow and develop.

The need for social work intervention

Just like women, children are also classified as vulnerable groups and are readily potential victims of abuse and harm because of their tender nature in all ramifications. Social workers are therefore interested in them, to guarantee the protection and also advance healthy growth and development for them (Okoye, Chukwu & Agwu, 2017). Social work intervention is needed to help *Almajiri* pupils grow from hopelessness to hope and confidence. Social workers play many roles in providing services to children and families (Ngwu, 2014). There is dignity in labour and the practice of street begging by children who should be learning life's survival skills should be greatly discouraged through social work intervention.

Concerted efforts are required to prevent the next generation, especially from the North from getting lost for good. Social workers should collaborate with the government in the distribution of palliatives because the palliatives promised by various governments are yet to reach these poor/ distressed families and also liaise with non-governmental organisations and with well-meaning/public-spirited individuals in rehabilitating the *Almajiris*. There is a need for social work intervention in establishing an educational

and social welfare system that supports *Almajiri* children in communities in Northern Nigeria. The social welfare system will help provide shelter for these vulnerable children who are living in deplorable conditions with poor hygiene and sanitation levels.

Social workers should advocate for the provision of healthcare and nutrition. They should rehabilitate and help the *Almajiris* regain their dignity lost due to exposure, abuse (physical and sexual), and exploitation. Social workers advocate for policy change and endear government at all levels into decisive action in the favour of these children. Policymakers must provide relief packages tailored particularly to this Nigeria's vulnerable children. Social work intervention also is required through the process of mobilizing traditional and faith leaders, social influencers, and other citizens as well as the victims themselves to stand up for the rights of *Almajiri* children to a fair start in life.

Conclusion

Owing to the COVID-19 outbreak, governors of the North are returning *Almajiri* children to their home states with the hope that this measure will solve the problem. Some have argued that the deportation of the *Almajiris* is illegal and unconstitutional because every Nigerian, irrespective of his or her status, is entitled to the full enjoyment of the fundamental human rights in the Constitution. Nigeria should adequately protect and promote the rights of a child under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child, duly domesticated in the Child Rights Act (Magashi, 2015, Kwagyang & Mahmood, 2015).

Every *Almajiri* child has a right to a life of dignity and the government must protect and empower them by fighting for their rights to education, health, safety, and nutrition. There is a need to develop a good resettlement programme backed by the law so that it will be sustainable. There is a need for social work intervention in ameliorating the sufferings of the *Almajiris* but the social workers cannot handle this challenge independently. It is the collective responsibility of social workers, faith leaders, policymakers, government at all levels, and other organisations to grant *Almajiris* protection and good life.

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